Unlearning Colonialism[1] by Attending to the Wisdom of Relational Renewal

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1 Although the term colonialism is typically understood to refer to an historic period during which Europeans travelled around the world, conquered foreign lands and people, and engaged in empire-building for their own political and economic benefit, we co-opt the term and use it to refer to the principle ideologies that descend from colonial worldview and that continue to exert heavy influence on institutionalized educational practices in the place now called Canada. We characterize colonialism as a distinctive set of principles that are dedicated to dividing the world according to falsely universalized and arbitrary classifications based on race, culture, and Euro-American experience in the world.

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Abstract

This article hinges on the conviction that the centuries-long dominance of colonial world-view has resulted in the creation of educational practices that perpetuate colonial forms of relationship denial in mostly subtle and unquestioned ways. As part of an ongoing effort to honour knowledge systems and ways of being that are not fully circumscribed by such colonial logics, we participated in a unique graduate course offered at the University of Alberta. The intention of the course is to engage with the wisdom teachings of relational renewal for the duration of the 13 Moon calendar, which shapes and characterizes the patterns of life and living that have been followed by Indigenous peoples in the northern plains region of North America for millennia. We share reflective insights from course participants, bring focus to three nêhiyaw (Cree) wisdom concepts, and conceptualize a model for unlearning colonial forms of relationship denial that emerges from our engagement with the course experience.

Keywords: teacher education, unlearning colonialism, wisdom tradition, relational renewal

Résumé

Cet article s'appuie sur la conviction que la domination séculaire d'une vision coloniale du monde a engendré des pratiques éducatives qui perpétuent le déni des formes coloniales de relations, le plus souvent de manière subtile et incontestée. Dans un effort visant à honorer des systèmes de savoirs et des modes d'existence échappant aux logiques coloniales, nous avons participé à un cours unique de cycle supérieur offert par l'Université de l'Alberta. L'intention du cours est de s'engager dans les enseignements de la sagesse du renouveau relationnel pendant toute la durée du calendrier des treize lunes. Ce calendrier ancestral façonne et caractérise les modes de vie des peuples autochtones des plaines nord-américaines depuis des millénaires. Nous partageons ici les réflexions des participants au cours, mettons l'accent sur trois concepts clés de la sagesse nêhiyaw (crie), et conceptualisons un modèle de désapprentissage des formes coloniales de déni des relations qui émerge de notre engagement dans l'expérience du cours.

Mots-clés : formation des enseignants, désapprendre le colonialisme, sagesse traditionnelle autochtone, renouveau relationnel

Introduction

In September 1874, treaty commissioners representing Queen Victoria traveled to Fort Qu'Appelle to negotiate the terms of a sacred promise to live in peace and friendship with nêhiyawak (Cree), Anihšināpēk (Saulteaux), Dakota, Lakota, and Nakoda peoples of the region. This promise came to be known as Treaty 4. Prior to this meeting, the Indigenous leaders had learned that the Hudson's Bay Company had sold their ancestral lands to the Dominion of Canada without their consultation or consent. Thus, when the treaty commissioners sought to initiate negotiations, they were surprised to learn that the leaders declined to discuss the treaty. Instead, an Anihšināpēk spokesman named Otahaoman explained (with the help of a translator) that the assembled peoples felt that there was "something in the way" of their ability to discuss the terms of the treaty in good faith (Morris, 2014, pp. 97–98). It took several days of discussion for the Queen's representatives to comprehend the concerns expressed by Otahaoman. The people were questioning the sincerity of these treaty negotiations because they knew that the Government of Canada had already made a side-deal with the Hudson's Bay Company for the purchase of their lands.[2] The view expressed by Otahaoman was that these side dealings undermined the integrity of the government's treaty intentions. Through the translator, Otahaoman clearly articulated the view that the Hudson's Bay Company really only had the permission of Indigenous peoples to conduct trade. They did not have the right to claim ownership over any land: "The Indians want the Company to keep at their post and nothing beyond. After that is signed they will talk about something else" (Morris, 2014, p. 110). Despite these misunderstandings, as well as notable disagreement among the various Indigenous groups in attendance, the terms of Treaty 4 were eventually ratified.

We begin with this story to draw attention to the persistence of colonial culture as "something in the way" of efforts to repair Indigenous–Canadian relations. The critical observation that Otahaoman articulated in 1874 is still a very relevant and unsettling problem today. Since 2010, Canadians have been engaged in an intensified public confrontation with colonial history and the systemic oppression of Indigenous peoples through

2 This "side-deal" is known as the Rupert's Land Purchase. In 1670, the British Crown gifted the Hudson's Bay Company a vast territory known as Rupert's Land. This gift provided the Hudson's Bay Company with exclusive control of this territory and the abundant natural resources that came from it. On March 20, 1869, the Hudson's Bay Company sold Rupert's Land to the Dominion of Canada.

the Indian Residential Schools system. In the wake of the *94 Calls to Action* (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015) issued by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) on Indian Residential Schools, educational jurisdictions and institutions across Canada rushed to respond to the Calls to Action through the implementation of various policies and program initiatives. However, the rush to reconciliation facilitates an active disregard of the truth of the ongoing governing influence held by colonial logics and structures in blocking possibilities for the emergence of healthy and balanced Indigenous–Canadian relations in Canada. Before reconciliation can even be considered as a possibility, a broad social, cultural, political, and educational reckoning process must be undertaken that focuses on unlearning colonialism. Colonial worldview remains mostly uninterrogated in Canadian educational contexts and continues to be "in the way" of meaningful Indigenous–Canadian relational renewal.

The insights and understandings shared in this article have emerged from the long-term relationships we have with each other, as well as our shared commitment to bring Indigenous wisdom teachings to the field of education in meaningful ways. Dwayne has been an educator for over 30 years and a teacher educator at the University of Alberta since 2003. His teaching and research interests have been inspired by the guidance provided by spiritual and ceremonial leaders. The course featured in this article is an example of this guidance. Lesley has been living and working as a guest in Treaty 7 territory for over 20 years and currently works as an educator in Calgary. She is also a teacher educator and a doctoral student in the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary. Her doctoral work has been profoundly influenced by her two-time participation as a student in the 13 Moon course process featured in this article. Etienna was born and raised in Grande Prairie, Alberta, and is a member of the Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation in Treaty 8 territory. She has experience teaching and leading in First Nations community schools, provincial educational systems, and teacher education programs. She is currently engaged in doctoral studies in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. Etienna also works as an assistant professor in the Department of Human Services and Early Learning at MacEwan University. She participated in the 13 Moon course as a graduate student and created a video compilation of her place and moon study with her daughter Layla.[3] As

3 This resource can be viewed at: https://www.youtube.com/@etiennamoostoos-lafferty9407

Indigenous teacher educators and researchers who have grappled with the truth of colonial inheritances, we have come to realize that the ways in which our students have been educated to understand Indigenous–Canadian relations have a distinctive bearing on what they decide to do in their own classrooms with their students when addressing Indigenous foundational knowledges and experiences. As we see it, an educator's very subjective theory of Indigenous–Canadian relations is often suffused with colonial logics and related cultural assumptions that deeply affect their understandings of knowledge and knowing and can effectively *block* possibilities for meaningful engagement with Indigenous worldview.[4] We understand these blockages as symptomatic of the perpetuation of colonial logics founded upon relationship denial. As teacher educators, we wonder how best to support and guide our students to *unlearn* these colonial forms of relationship denial and instead prioritize relational renewal as a curricular and pedagogical commitment. We offer this article as an expression of this wondering.

Colonial Worldview as a Lingering Educative Force

Before carrying on with consideration of the contemporary significance of colonial legacies in the context of teacher education in Canada, some broader and more theoretical understandings of colonial culture need to be considered. Following Dirlik (1999), we view colonialism as the process through which Euro-Americans[5] "conquered the world, renamed places, rearranged economies, societies, and politics, and erased or drove to the margins premodern ways of knowing, space, time, and…universalized history in their own self-image in an unprecedented manner" (p. 3). Important to understanding this process in this way is the realization that the drive to intellectually colonize the world was intimately connected to the economic and political motives more commonly considered when studying colonialism. It follows, then, that considerations of the tremendous impact of European "discovery" and conquest of new lands on the creation of enlightened sub-

4 Since colonialism is a shared inheritance of all people living in the place called Canada, we understand this observation as applicable to all educators, whether they are Indigenous people or not. However, the influence of colonialism on our lives is experienced differently based on our differing identities and subject positions.

5 Although Dirlik does not explain his use of this term, we have included it in the quote because it works well with our interpretations of colonialism. By "Euro-American," we mean to show that people working in the interests of Europeans and their kin who colonized *and* settled places around the world (most extensively in North, Central, and South America*)* were the main proponents and instigators of colonial activity.

jectivities are crucial to understanding the social and cultural legacies of colonialism. Such cultural, social, and intellectual colonialism manifested itself in the Euro-American "will to know" the world through collecting, classifying, cataloguing, and exhibiting vast amounts of information about the colonized people and their lands (Foucault, 1981). This conceptualization of knowledge, based on difference, was an integral part of colonial worldview in that it was based on power. The power to collect, catalogue, classify, exhibit, and textualize meant that knowledge or information that had been collected from around the world would be evaluated on Euro-American terms and assimilated to suit their own political, economic, social, cultural, and educational needs. This was essentially a monologue on the riches of the world and their usefulness to Europeans and their kin. There was no need to consider the "Other" perspective that was part of this discourse on colonialism because it was assumed that Euro-American interpretations of the world were rational, objective, scientific, accurate, universally relevant, and beneficial to all. Growing out of these interpretations was an educational imperative to "construct an encyclopedic mastery of the globe" (Willinsky, 1994, p. 613), which became a model guiding Euro-American speculations on perceived new worlds, new peoples, new species, and unfamiliar ways of knowing. Notions of citizenship and the purposes of education were united by the goal of coming to know the world according to this colonizer's model (Blaut, 2012).

The values and principles contained in this model undoubtedly grew out of the tremendous upheaval that occurred in Europe as a result of colonial processes. The flood of information about new people in new lands, and all of the wealth and new products produced, required new ways of making sense. This process of amelioration came with consciousness of the presumed fact that God was on the side of the Europeans in this endeavour of discovery and reasoned investigation. In this view, the thrusts of modernity—the worldview that uses science, reason, and technology as benchmarks of truth and human achievement—are universally justifiable as God-given instruments of civilization, development, and Progress.[6] An important point to ponder within this understanding, though, is that Europeans and their kin only came to view themselves as civilized and modern in contradistinction to

6 We choose to capitalize this term to denote its mythological prominence within settler colonial societies like Canada. This notion of Progress has grown out of the colonial experience and is predicated on the pursuit of unfettered economic growth and material prosperity stemming from faith in market capitalism. For more on this see Donald (2019) and Nisbet (1980).

the colonial Other (Dussel, 1992/1995; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). What this means is that Euro-American versions of successful human beingness are dependent on and intimately connected to colonial principles and the corresponding cultural assumptions held as true by settler peoples living on colonized lands. Yet, it is precisely this intimate co-dependence, and the thorough influences of the colonized on the colonizers, that is denied in Euro-American understandings of knowledge, knowing, and what it means to live well as a human being. This relational denial has deformed interactions between colonizer and colonized and delimited the conceptual terms used to imagine a different kind of relationship for both. It is for this reason that we believe that this project of unlearning colonialism must begin by taking note of the extensive ways in which the conceptual terrain of teacher education has been so deeply influenced by colonial worldview.

Colonial ideologies have got "in the way" of schooling practices in the sense that prevailing curricular and pedagogical approaches perpetuate colonial forms of relationship denial. For us, the central difficulty with this inheritance is that the governing principle of relationship denial has become so deeply embedded in institutional practices that it has become naturalized and normalized as a commonsense characteristic of a well-educated person. Maldonado-Torres (2007) describes this condition as coloniality of being:

> Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breath coloniality all the time and everyday. (p. 243)

In educational settings, the power associated with the presumed correctness of this way of being has often been transformed into a form of violence when it is imposed on students as the only way to be a successful human being. Wynter (1995), for example, has argued that the arrival of Christopher Columbus to the Americas instigated a centuries-long process wherein a falsely universalized model of the human being was imposed on people around the world. She asserts that this particular advancement of colonial power has served to "absolutize the behavioural norms encoded in our present culture-specific conception of being human, allowing it to be posited as if it were the universal of the human species" (pp. 42–43). The assertion of this colonial power is carried out in the name of Progress. Formal schooling eventually became a primary means by which those

with power could discipline the citizenry to conform to this model of the human being and this notion of Progress. As we see it, this has resulted in the dominance of curricular and pedagogical approaches that perpetuate these universalized behavioural norms by persistently presenting knowledge and knowing according to the rubric of relationship denial. The dominance of this rubric has resulted in the creation of educational practices that perpetuate relationship denial in mostly subtle and unquestioned ways. One prominent form of relationship denial is evident in the ways in which the mental aspect of a human being is considered more important than the emotional, spiritual, and physical aspects. The possibility for holistic unity and balance is denied when the different aspects of a human being are increasingly fragmented and disassociated from each other as a person becomes formally educated. The teachings of relationship denial can also be seen in the ways in which human beings are taught to believe that their needs always supersede the needs of other forms of life. They are also evident in the ways in which students are taught to deny relationships that they have with people who do not look like them, speak like them, think like them, or pray like them. When someone is educated to accept relationship denial as a way of being in the world, it becomes part of how they are as a human being—how they live—and this acceptance has a very distinctive bearing on how they understand knowledge and knowing.

For the purposes of this article, and with regard to this special issue "Bridging Social and Ecological Justice," we wish to draw specific attention to the sacred ecology teachings that centre on the wisdom of kinship relationality. These wisdom teachings emphasize how human beings are at their best when they recognize themselves as enmeshed in networks of human and more-than-human relationships that enable life and living. Thus, following this relational kinship wisdom, human beings are called to repeatedly acknowledge and honour the sun, the moon, the sky, the land, the wind, the water, the animals, and the trees (just to name a few), as quite literally our kinship relations. Humans are fully reliant on these entities for survival and so the wise person works to ensure that those more-than-human relatives are healthy and consistently honoured. Cradled within this kinship teaching is an understanding that healthy human-to-human relations (Social Justice) depend upon and flow from healthy relations with the more-than-human (Ecological Justice). They cannot be separated. For us as teacher educators, the implications of this wisdom insight are profound. If we wish to help our students unlearn colonial forms of relationship denial—in this example, the assertion that human needs always

supersede the needs of other forms of life—then we have to help our students experience this kinship enmeshment in an embodied, holistic, sustained, and life-practice way. We cannot just tell them about it or ask them to read about it. Such work requires careful attentiveness to the wisdom of kinship relationality as a possible "way" to recover from the ecological violence of anthropocentrism, as well as a willingness to experiment with teaching and learning processes that provide people with opportunities to reconsider how they have come to understand themselves as human beings.

Unlearning Colonialism as a Complex Pedagogical Process

The concept of unlearning colonialism may seem a contradiction to some. Is it actually possible to unlearn a mindset that has been learned and relearned in such a thorough way? Some may say that once something is learned, you cannot undo that learning; you can only trouble that initial learning and seek to learn differently. While we are mindful of the contradictions that can accompany use of the term unlearning, we also consider it an apt articulation of the complex pedagogical process we seek to elevate in this article. For us, the educational challenge of denaturalizing common sense expressions of colonial forms of relationship denial cannot be effectively addressed by only attending to the intellectual needs of learners. Following the wise analyses of St. Denis (2007, 2011), the most common sense institutional corrective response to attitudes and opinions considered problematic is to insist that those people who hold such viewpoints be required to complete some of sort of cultural awareness seminar or workshop. In this example, the assumption is that this educational problem is basically informational in character, so the emphasis is on transmitting the correct information so that the offending person will no longer hold those problematic attitudes and opinions. We have come to view the educational common sense expressed in this response to be highly questionable for multiple reasons. Returning back to our focus on colonial worldview, it is true that the complex task of unlearning colonial forms of relationship denial does require learning more about colonial worldview and the ways in which the cultural assumptions of that worldview deeply inform the structure and character of the common sense conventions of educational practices. However, it cannot only rely upon learning about such things in an informational way. To do so is to assume that relationship denial is really just an intellectual problem and that unlearning can be facilitated via a detailed three-hour lecture with accompanying slides.

The difficult truth is that colonial forms of relationship denial are much more than just intellectual problems. Human beings who accept colonial worldview as natural, normal, and common sense come to embody colonial forms of relationship denial that teach them to divide the world. So, educators must indeed be guided to recognize the presence of colonial logics in their programs and prioritize unlearning colonialism as an urgent curricular and pedagogical commitment. However, we have learned that the struggle to unlearn cannot end with simply learning about such concerns in an informational way. Somehow, the challenging process of unlearning must be gently provoked and then put in motion in a manner that supports and sustains the person experiencing it.

In educational research, the concept of unlearning is often associated with the need to trace, confront, and reconsider prejudices and assumptions that have been uncritically accepted as correct and legitimate (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Korteweg & Fiddler, 2018). As Howell (2022) characterizes it, "unlearning recognizes that we've learned something that we are now calling into question. It indicates a willingness to encounter and reimagine past learning, new ways of education, and thinking about wisdom and knowledge" (p. 46). This understanding is akin to Freire's concept of conscientization, or the educational process of raising the critical consciousness of learners by systematically unveiling to them how they have been misled or misinformed (Freire, 1970). The general unifying message associated with this type of unlearning is that dominant systems of knowledge and representation must be questioned, and sometimes abandoned, so that human beings can respond to change in critical and innovative ways. However, research on unlearning also draws attention to the need to question and eschew conventional learning theories that can stifle pedagogical innovation and creativity. For example, Dunne (2016) seeks to expose the ways in which institutionalized conceptions of learning are circumscribed by dominant learning theories, hierarchical categorizations, and epistemological assumptions that give a false sense of technical surety to the work of educators. In a similar way, McWilliam (2008) laments the continuing dominance of "uncreative pedagogies" that replicate the "transmissive pedagogical culture" (p. 264) of 20th century industrial-model approaches to education. Researchers focused on unlearning have asserted that such pedagogical innovation occurs most productively within collaborative professional learning contexts that understand unlearning as iterative, fluxic, always-in-process, and inclusive of the multiple varied ways that human beings perceive the world and make sense of their place in it (McLeod et al., 2020).

Our working understanding of the complex pedagogical process of unlearning colonialism is that it begins with a commitment to an in-depth engagement with the overriding presence of colonial culture and colonial frontier logics[7] in our daily lives. This pedagogical commitment is guided by a trans-temporal ethical understanding that any meaningful deliberations on how to proceed differently in the future must begin by "working backwards, tracing trajectories to the present moment, carefully working out the lineages that brought current conditions into being" (Smith, 2006, p. 83). However, in emphasizing the task of *working backwards*, we remain wisely aware that such work also instigates trans-temporal awarenesses that simultaneously causes one to work laterally with the present and forward with the future. As teacher educators, we have come to understand that our students must be carefully guided to engage with this dynamic confluence of past, present, and future through detailed inquiries focused on the legacies of colonial culture and relationship denial embedded, and often hidden, within their educational and life experiences. In doing so, we seek to make topical for them a critical understanding that their educational experiences have trained them to accept "zero point epistemology" as an accurate cartographic representation of knowledge classifications and rankings used to assess the relative value of human beingness according to colonial worldview (Mignolo, 2011). Mignolo, who translates the work of Colombian philosopher Castro-Gomez, explains that the "zero point is the site of observation from which the epistemic colonial differences and the epistemic imperial differences are mapped out" (p. 80). In this mapping practice, the knowledge traditions of Europeans and their kin are located at the centre—point zero—and following this standard, knowledge systems that do not conform to the zero point are considered to be uncivilized, inferior, and irrelevant:

> all forms of human knowledge are ordered on an epistemological scale from the traditional to the modern, from barbarism to civilization, from the community to the individual, from the orient to occident.… By way of this strategy, scientific thought positions itself as the only valid form of producing knowledge and Europe acquires an epistemological hegemony over all the other cultures of the world. (pp. 79–80)

7 Colonial frontier logics are those epistemological assumptions and presuppositions, derived from the colonial project of dividing the world according to racial, cultural, and civilizational categorizations, which serve to naturalize assumed divides and thus contribute to their social and institutional perpetuation. For more on this, see Donald (2012).

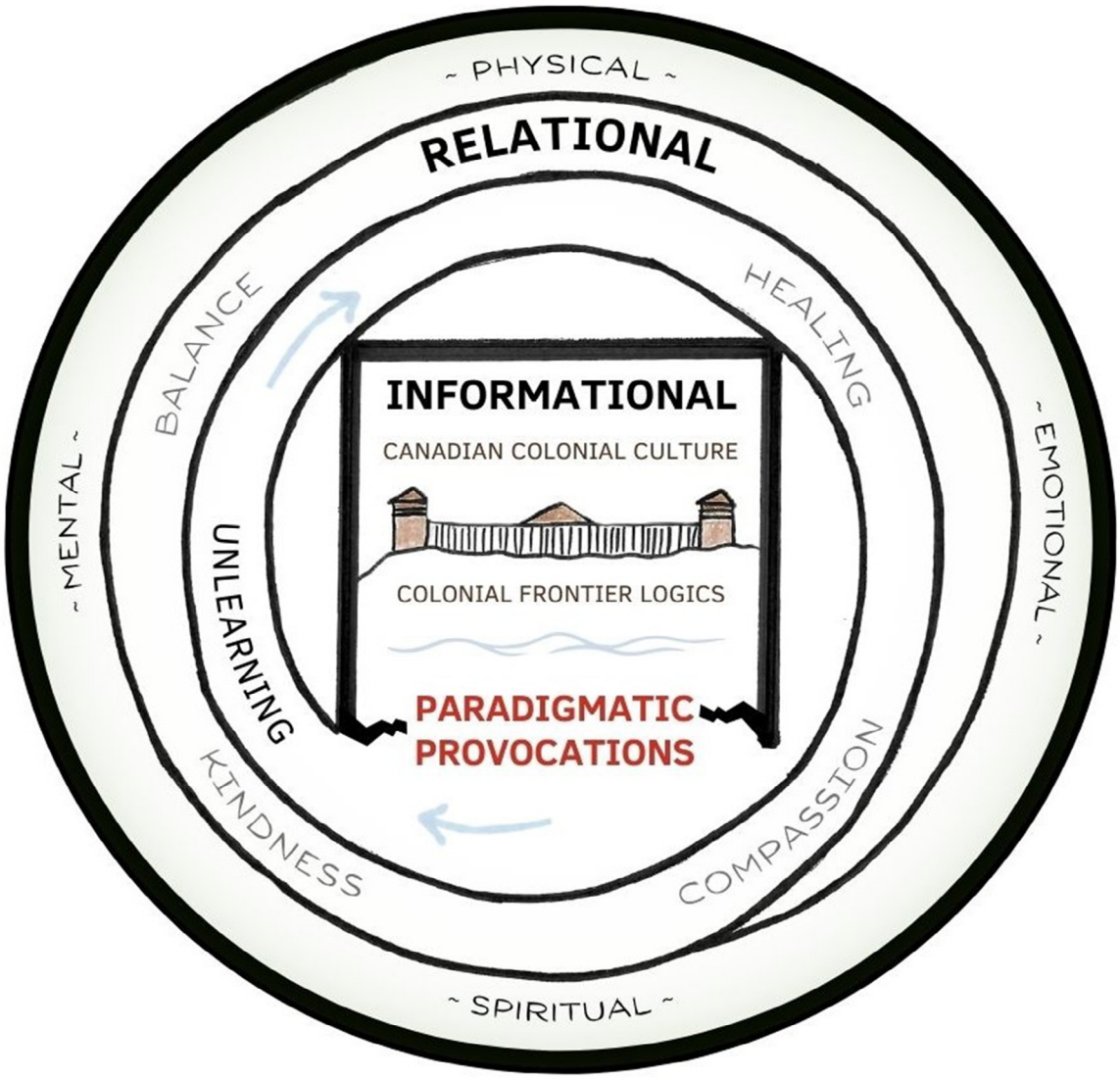
For the purposes of this article, the key point here is that the knowledge paradigms that structure and inform conventional teaching and learning practices are founded on zero point epistemologies that locate Indigenous knowledges on the margins of what is considered important to know. The educational purpose of the colonial project of "discovery, conquest, possession, and dominion are about ways of knowing the world, of surveying, mapping, and classifying it in an endless theorizing of identity and difference" (Willinsky, 1998, p. 85). This "exhibitionary pedagogy" provided Euro-Americans with an educational opportunity to repeatedly re-assert their superiority by putting on display the "uncivilized" ways of the rest of the world (Willinsky, 1998). In this example, the main purpose guiding the exhibition of Indigenous knowledge is to proffer its strange and outdated cultural difference in contrast to accepted common sense norms regarding knowledge and knowing. Thus, we see detailed study of colonial culture and colonial frontier logics as necessary to help the students *reposition* themselves in relation to Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing. To avoid getting trapped in zero point and exhibitionary approaches, students must be supported to make a relocative transition from *learning about* in an informational way to *learning from* in a relational way. However, we know that their ability to make this transition is effectively blocked by the pervasiveness of colonial logics within schooling contexts. In order to overcome this blockage, and be meaningfully relocated, students require a paradigmatic provocation.[8] If students are to perceive Indigenous knowledge and knowing as more than just information, they must be taught according to teaching and learning paradigms that are unfamiliar to them. In our experience, if students are taught in ways that are familiar to them, then the unlearning will not be transformative, provocative, or sustained. They will continue to rely on familiar institutional approaches to knowledge and knowing. For us, the task of unlearning colonialism requires educators to intentionally create teaching and learning opportunities for their students that arise from Indigenous knowledge paradigms and prompt their students to begin to perceive knowledge and knowing differently. Such paradigmatic provocation sets in motion the complex and difficult process of unlearning colonialism by instigating within the learners a delicate unravelling of previously held cultural assumptions derived

8 We are aware that a provocation is usually understood as an act that perturbs people and can cause them to react rashly and with anger. Our usage is much more gentle and intended to denote that an experience with an unfamiliar knowledge paradigm can arouse productive and energizing curiosity for those that experience it.

from the perceived authoritative correctness of colonial worldview. Importantly, this type of unlearning cannot be imposed, predetermined, or accomplished with just one provocative learning event; rather, it is a complex pedagogical process that must be consistently re-engaged to provide transformation. Such transformation becomes possible for the learners when the task of unlearning colonialism is undertaken in accordance with the Indigenous wisdom principles of balance, compassion, kindness, healing, and relationality.

Figure 1

A Conceptual Model for Unlearning Colonialism



Thirteen Moons as Paradigmatic Provocation

A vital source of inspiration for our understandings of unlearning colonialism and paradigmatic provocation is a unique graduate course offered by the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. The course is based on the 13 Moon calendar which shapes and characterizes the patterns of life and living that have been followed by Indigenous Peoples in the northern plains region of North America for millennia. Specifically, the course is guided by the wisdom tradition teachings of holism and the sacred ecological patterns of the 13 Moon and four-season cycles as practiced by maskotêw nêhiyawak (Plains Cree). The course was first offered in 2014[9] as the result of a request from kisêyiniw Kihew[10], a highly respected spiritual and ceremonial leader from Maskêkosihk Enoch Cree Nation, who asked Dwayne if they could teach a course together. The result of their collaboration is an experimental 13 Moon course process aimed at the intentional commingling of scholarly inquiry, holistic ceremonial and spiritual practices, and personal and shared experiential engagements.

The spirit and intent of kisêyiniw Kihew's involvement in the course stems from his own lengthy experience as a ceremonial leader in Indigenous community settings and Indigenous liaison/cultural helper in a large urban hospital. After many years of observing typical institutional practices in education, health care, and social work, he came to the realization that something important was missing from those practices that was causing people to be unbalanced and unwell. For him, what is missing is the wisdom tradition understanding that all human beings are comprised of physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental aspects that must be regularly addressed in balanced and conjoining ways to generate holistic wellness. This struggle for balance is understood as a fundamental

9 The course has been offered four times since the initial offering in 2014.

10 In English, he is known as Elder Bob Cardinal. Following the guidance of Bob, we have decided not to use the title of "Elder" for him. While the title has become commonly used as a way to denote respect to elderly Indigenous people who offer advice and guidance, the use of "Elder" can also cause misunderstandings. Following traditional practices and protocols, people who earn the right to provide spiritual and ceremonial leadership are much more than just elderly. They have dedicated their lives to serving the spiritual and ceremonial needs of their community. Through long-term service to the community and their dedication to living a ceremonial lifestyle, they have earned the trust of the community to care for their spiritual and ceremonial needs. Thus, in the context of this article, we refer to Bob more appropriately as kisêyiniw Kihew. Kihew is his traditional name; it translates as "the Eagle." kisêyiniw is an honorific titled that can be loosely understood as referring to a kindhearted and gentle old man who serves the Creator.

and unending life challenge to all human beings. To guide people to address this challenge, kisêyiniw Kihew shares traditional wisdom teachings in accordance with how he was taught by spiritual leaders that guided him as a young man. This involves an organic approach to learning that focuses on renewing relationships with the living entities surrounding us that make life possible. Following the relational wisdom of that insight, kisêyiniw Kihew provides course participants with opportunities to repeatedly acknowledge and honour in practical ways the truth that our bodies are inhabited by the life around us. We carry parts of each of them inside our own bodies. We are fully reliant on them for our survival. When we honour the sacred ecological entities around us, we simultaneously honour ourselves. Thus, a central commitment that kisêyiniw Kihew brings to the course is to connect all people to the sacred ecological gifts that exist in the place where they live, work, and study. His view is that connecting people in this way will make it more likely that they will see those gifts as part of themselves as human beings and then they will want to protect them. When human beings understand themselves as enmeshed together in intricate networks of relationships that they depend upon for their survival, they are more likely to behave in ethically relational[11] ways (Donald, 2016, 2019, 2021). In the context of the course, kisêyiniw Kihew guides participants to understand that the quality and character of human-to-human relations is directly connected to the quality and character of human-to-more-than-human relations. To state this insight differently, it is considered a mistake—and a legacy of colonial forms of relationship denial—to separate human-to-human relations from the more-than-human entities that sustain us.

It is for this reason that the 13 Moon course focuses on the wisdom of relational renewal as a way to facilitate transformations in how course participants understand knowledge and knowing. The presence of relational renewal as a guiding ethic becomes apparent for course participants as they gather together each moon for full immersive

11 ”Ethical relationality is an ecological understanding of organic connectivity that becomes readily apparent to us as human beings when we honour the sacred ecology that supports all life and living… ethical relationality is tied to a desire to acknowledge and honour the significance of the relationships we have with others, how our histories and experiences position us in relation to each other, and how our futures as people in the world are similarly tied together. It is an ethical imperative to remember that we as human beings live in the world together and also alongside our more-than-human relatives; we are called to constantly think and act with reference to those relationships” (Donald, 2016, p. 10).

days that commence with traditional smudging, prayer, and sharing circles to enliven the healing energy that begins to circulate between them. These gatherings occur in a variety of off-campus settings that are intentionally chosen to provoke critical awareness among participants that they are being delicately immersed in an educational paradigm that is qualitatively different from their previous educational experience. These off-campus settings include sacred sites, ceremonial contexts in Indigenous communities, the North Saskatchewan River valley in Edmonton, as well as kisêyiniw Kihew's ceremonial grounds and teaching lodge located in his home community of Maskêkosihk Enoch Cree Nation. Gathering at these various sites, coupled with the unique character of the course inquiry process, instigates a gentle unravelling of the assumed correctness of common sense educational practices that have comprised the bulk of their previous understandings of what it means to be well-educated.

Gently, and with kindness, kisêyiniw Kihew supports course participants with ceremonies, sacred site visits, stories, and other relational renewing practices, so that they can realize for themselves how they have come to embody colonial forms of relationship denial in their daily lives. Since colonial forms of relationship denial cause fragmentation, disassociation, and imbalance within human beings that are subjected to such practices of denial, practices of relational renewal involve repairing the relationships that have been denied and renewing them in more ethically relational ways. In a practical sense, this requires carefully attending to the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical aspects of a person in ways that reintroduce and reconnect them to each other. Course participants often experience this wisdom understanding as a healing process of gradually being pieced back together so that they can feel more fully human. This healing arises as they are repeatedly and consistently engaged in ceremonies, circle teachings, sacred site visits, and various course-inspired activities and inquiries that address all four parts of them in balanced ways. Importantly, these healing experiences are often prompted by the humble guidance of kisêyiniw Kihew, but they are also educed as course participants engage in sustained study of the lunar and seasonal ecological patterns around them for the duration of the course. Thus, this form of relational renewal is produced through careful attentiveness to the place-based ecological patterns that make life possible. Course participants study the moon for the duration of the course and develop personalized methods of note-taking, reflection, visual art, and digital recordings to chronicle what the moon teaches them. Participants are also asked to select a particular outdoor location to

study for the duration of the 13 Moon and four-season flow of the course. Their specific task is to discern the unique character of the place and somehow meaningfully express how the life they observe at the place can guide *them* on how to live well.[12]

While the true evocative beauty of this course is difficult to express in the context of an academic article like this, we have endeavoured to provide enough detail to characterize the importance of a paradigmatic provocation in helping people begin the challenging process of unlearning colonialism. Our view is that such provocation and unlearning is urgently needed in contemporary educational settings in order to help people undergo meaningful and sustained transformation in how they understand knowledge, knowing, teaching, and learning. The current educational context is so replete with cultural assumptions derived from colonial worldview that most people find it quite challenging to imagine other knowledge systems or ways of being. From our shared standpoint, we consider this struggle to honour other knowledge systems or ways of being as directly connected to the clear and urgent need to live in less ecologically destructive ways. It is important to acknowledge that post-secondary institutions in Canada have become increasingly interested in the possible contributions that Indigenous knowledges and experiences can make to the field of education. This interest has come mostly in the form of mandatory Indigenous content courses in teacher education programs (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Purton, 2023). Even though important progress has been made, we note that the lingering influence of relationship denial remains evident in institutional practices, most notably seen in the tendency to champion Indigenous initiatives using the metaphoric grammar of decolonization, indigenization, or reconciliation (Tuck & Yang, 2012). For the most part, these metaphors signify the "conditional inclusion" of Indigenous content as long as it can fit within the already existing onto-epistemological superstructure of the university (Stein, 2020, pp. 161–163). Under such conditions, meaningful structural change is avoided and cultural change is selective and superficial. While there is growing awareness of the emptiness of these metaphors, we note with disappointment that there are few university-led programming initiatives directed toward sustained and fulsome engagement with Indigenous knowledge and knowing in direct relation to curriculum, pedagogy, and educational philosophy more generally. As noted previously, institutional practices are still mostly preoccupied with transmitting generic information *about* Indi-

12 This approach is inspired partially by Yunkaporta's (2019) urging to "Be like your place" (pp. 221–237).

genous peoples and their ways. Such practices do little to provoke students to understand differently and instigate the difficult healing process of relocating themselves in relation to colonial inheritances and the logic of "zero point epistemology" (Mignolo, 2011, pp. 79–80). As we understand it, this extended repositioning process we call unlearning colonialism emerges organically when students are provided with extended opportunities to engage with local Indigenous wisdom practices and remember together what they have been educated to forget.

Insights from Course Participants

A version of the 13 Moon class was offered from April 2022 to April 2023. At the conclusion of our 13 sessions together, course participants were invited to gather together a few moons later for a recorded sharing circle conversation focused on key insights and takeaways that they derived from the course process. Basically, we wanted to better understand what participation in the course meant to each of them and how they could articulate those meanings to us. Seven students—four of whom are Indigenous—accepted our invitation and we gathered together once again at kisêyiniw Kihew's teaching lodge at Maskêkosihk Enoch Cree Nation. This location was fitting as it was the meeting place for many of our class sessions and so participants were already very familiar with the comforts of the place. As per our shared ceremonial practices repeatedly renewed throughout the course process, we began the session with smudging, prayer, and protocol offerings. The seven participants, six of whom are experienced public school educators, were then reminded of our specific research interests and the sharing circle conversation began. Three prominent themes emerged from this sharing circle conversation. Although these themes are intimately interrelated, and often difficult to separate out, we describe and elaborate upon each theme below:

Slowing Down

In nêhiyawêwin (the Cree language), there is a beautiful wisdom concept known as wawetinah. Wawetinah has its origins in ceremonial settings and pertains to spiritual practices. In ceremonial settings, there is emphasis on properly preparing for the ceremony and proceeding appropriately with it when the time is right. These ways are under-

stood as ancestral inheritances from deep time that are aligned with the spiritual practices that have sustained the people for millennia. When wawetinah is spoken in ceremonial settings, it is intended as a reminder to not rush. The view is that rushing makes it much more likely that a mistake will be made in preparations and proceedings that will undermine the integrity of the ceremony being observed. Since such mistakes are undesirable, slowing down is one way to make it more likely that the ceremony will proceed as it should according to the proper protocols.

The wisdom concept of wawetinah is a good example of an ancient teaching that can still guide us today, even though the character of our lives is dramatically different from the lives of our ancestors. With this spirit and intent, we have begun to invoke wawetinah as a pedagogical principle that is part of the paradigmatic provocation provided in the context of the 13 Moon course that helps support the challenging task of unlearning colonialism. If we consider our teaching and learning processes as ceremonial in their own ways, then wawetinah can be understood as a pedagogical call to slow down and avoid rushing from topic to topic or task to task with the focus on consuming as much information as possible. Pedagogically, wawetinah invites us to engage in careful unhurried deliberations. Doing so makes it less likely that we will overlook important considerations or find ourselves in undesirable circumstances. Engaging in wawetinah in educational settings means that we seek to understand an issue, teaching, or process in its depth and fullness. It is a pedagogical call to be wisely aware, and to think, feel, and experience in an embodied and multi-sensorial way.

Participants in the 13 Moon course process holistically experience the concept of wawetinah. One specific way that we support this is by asking them to create a symbol to represent the most meaningful insight that they take away from each class meeting and provide an explanation for each symbol created.[13] Students are then asked to create a synthesizing story for the course that brings conceptual unity to the 13 symbols they have created. The symbols and resultant synthesizing story express their practice of wawetinah. They also experience wawetinah by deciding for themselves what they learn from study of the moon and their place for a full trip around the sun. Course participants

13 This symbol-creation task is inspired by the winter count tradition as practiced by Indigenous Peoples on the North American Prairies. The winter count was a symbolic way to recall significant events that occurred in the lives of the people. Symbols descriptive of the event were created and painted on buffalo robes by community members skilled in those areas. For an example of its educational use, see Stanger et al. (2013).

are also immersed in wawetinah at the beginning of each of our sessions. As previously noted, each session begins with ceremonial smudging, prayer, and sharing circle protocols to allow them to become wisely aware in a unified and life-giving way. A participant expressed the experience of slowing down this way:

> It's busy, it's busy in life and one of the lessons that I have been working on for a long time—and it's amazing how hard it is—is just really slow down and be present and take time to do the things that really fill my cup and fill my heart. It's like an ongoing challenge because things just keep coming up. I found that often I was like "Oh gosh, how am I going to figure out Saturday?" And then you arrive and you're like "This is exactly where I need to be and exactly where I am meant to be. Thank goodness I'm here." It was that kind of feeling month after month.

The pedagogical importance of wawetinah is clarified when we reflect on the general busyness of our lives today. Course participants typically work full time, have busy family lives, and are also engaged in graduate studies. As students and as educators, they become accustomed to the demands of institutional scheduling, timelines, due dates, and more and more things to do, and this educational paradigm establishes within them a burdensome and adversarial relationship with time. So, in this case, wawetinah serves as a paradigmatic provocation that course participants respond to viscerally. They learn to settle in to the opportunity to nurture a different relationship with time. Doing so opens them up to other pedagogical possibilities that are connected to the task of unlearning colonialism.

Healing

In the context of this 13 Moon course process, kisêyiniw Kihew often states that the purpose of our time together is to support healing. While healing can be understood in many different ways, kisêyiniw Kihew guides course participants to experience healing as a balancing of the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical aspects of their being. As stated previously, this balance is understood as elusive, temporary, and in constant need of renewal. What kisêyiniw Kihew is most interested in is providing course participants with daily practices that they can follow to help them renew their balance as they live their busy and demanding lives. His view is that this holistic balancing is a form of

wellness that enables course participants to make the long journey from their heads (intellectual knowing) to their hearts (embodied knowing). This commitment to balance as an integral aspect of being well is connected to another wisdom concept expressed in nêhiyawêwin as iyinihkaysowin. Iyinihkaysowin refers to self-care and knowing how to heal yourself. When a human being practices iyinihkaysowin, it means that they recognize what makes them well and they know how to activate those practices to care for themselves. Thus, in this example, the practice of iyinihkaysowin enables temporary forms of healing and balance for the human beings who enact it.

Although the intimate interconnectivities between balance, healing, and iyinihkaysowin are difficult to express in writing, it is still important to attend to them in the context of this article because much of kisêyiniw Kihew's spiritual guidance and support during the course process focuses on those wisdom principles. He seeks to provide course participants with practices that they can carry on with on their own once the course meetings have ended. Here is how one course participant characterized the healing guidance received from kisêyiniw Kihew:

> Bob had so many great things that he shared with me in this course, so many gifts that I received from him in this course…I still remember him saying "If you ever get lost…use tapahtêyimisowin (humility), you can use that word like a map. That word will help you find your way." So, I have been pretty lost and that has helped a lot. That notion of humility…I feel like what I have gained from focusing on that word humility—tapahtêyimisowin, it has given me some kind of insight into balance, into putting yourself in place, and in connection, and in relationship, in a way that flows and moves. In a way that kind of repairs some the violence that's done by that Western way of thinking that we are outside of things. Philosophers might call it that Cartesian split, where you are outside of the thing looking in. If you can repair some of that, actually forget about that, that you are actually inside not outside.… There is something about putting yourself back in connection, and back in place, and back into balance that has been really prominent for me in this course and has been very healing.

Relational Renewal

If relationship denial is indeed the fundamental organizing principle undergirding colonial worldview, and if educational institutions and their practices are largely organized in conformity with colonial forms of relationship denial, then the possibility of unlearning colonial forms of relationship denial is dependent upon curricular and pedagogical approaches that repair and renew the relationships that have been denied. Importantly, and in accordance with maskotêw nêhiyawak wisdom teachings, it is considered a mistake to consider the task of relational renewal as a purely human endeavour. It requires insight and guidance from our more-than-human kin. In nêhiyawêwin, one way this kinship understanding is expressed is with the wisdom concept wâhkôhtowin. Translated into English, wâhkôhtowin is generally understood to refer to kinship and relationality. In a practical way, wâhkôhtowin describes the ethical obligations and responsibilities that we have to our human relatives and provides good guidance on how to conduct ourselves as good relatives. However, wâhkôhtowin also refers to more-than-human kinship relations. The nêhiyaw worldview emphasizes honouring the ancient kinship relationships that humans have with all forms of life that comprise their traditional territories. This emphasis teaches human beings to understand themselves as fully enmeshed in networks of relationships that support and enable their life and living. Métis elder Maria Campbell (2007) eloquently addresses wâhkôhtowin kinship teachings with these words:

> And our teachings taught us that all of creation is related and inter-connected to all things within it.… Wahkotowin meant honoring and respecting those relationships. They are our stories, songs, ceremonies, and dances that taught us from birth to death our responsibilities and reciprocal obligations to each other. Human to human, human to plants, human to animals, to the water and especially to the earth. And in turn all of creation had responsibilities and reciprocal obligations to us. (p. 5)

Thus, following the kinship wisdom of wâhkôhtowin, human beings are called to repeatedly acknowledge and honour their enmeshment in the network of relations—human and more-than-human—that enable their life and living. The intelligent human response to acknowledgement of this enmeshment is to dedicate oneself to the maintenance of the health of these networks and ensure their continuance beyond your own lifetime.

Perhaps the most pivotal relocative shift facilitated within course participants through the 13 Moon process is an extended opportunity to engage with the "wâhkôhtowin imagination" (Donald, 2021). With the kind and compassionate guidance of kisêyiniw Kihew, course participants are slowly invited to align themselves with the ancient story of kinship relationality that the maskotêw nêhiyawak have lived in accordance with for thousands of years. These stories, and the gifted life practices and related wisdom teachings that flow from them, are enmeshed within a kinship connectivity of original treaties between human beings and all other forms of life. The combination of the place and moon studies conducted alongside gentle moon-to-moon guidance from kisêyiniw Kihew seems to enliven within course participants a renewed understanding of their enmeshment within the networks of life that surround them. Here is how one participant expressed this enlivenment:

> I really developed a relationship with the moon that I didn't really think about before. I didn't think about my relationship with the moon at all. I have thought a lot about my relationship to place before, but moon was very new for me. It's amazing the things at my place and with the moon that you can't believe you didn't notice before. I feel like it was just constantly like that throughout the whole experience … So, being in a course like this where…I found that I hadn't had that opportunity as a student before, to really experience that. I really see what feelings came up for people here. I wasn't expecting that learning journey, but that was pretty beautiful too.

In the context of our 13 Moon and four-season inquiry process, attending to the wisdom of wâhkôhtowin renews awareness of the obligations and responsibilities that human beings have to the more-than-human life that makes our lives possible. However, good relations with more-than-human entities are understood as also beneficial to human relations. To state this critical point differently, the possibility for kind and compassionate human-to-human relationships is dependent upon the human ability to honour our ancient responsibilities and obligations to more-than-human relations in kind and compassionate ways.[14] These kinship interconnectivities provided a unique form of relational renewal, as articulated very well by this participant:

14 Our attention to kindness and compassion in making this point is inspired, in part, by Lightning (1992).

> Everyone in this space has held me so well.…We just really help each other that way.… You come in and sit in the circle, baring your soul, you think you are gonna talk about one thing, you open your mouth, and you are holding the rock…your body just knows what they want to say and you're not gonna do anything about it. Your brain has no ability to keep score or gatekeep your mouth from saying what's really in your heart in the circle. It's very amazing and intimidating. But, as time goes on, just the security you have with people you know, that they are listening and that they care for you, and that it's reciprocal and you are always thinking about them.

In our experience, becoming holistically aware of our enmeshment in relationships—human and more-than-human—and being guided on how to honour and renew those relationships as a daily life practice constitutes a very significant and meaningful paradigmatic provocation that enlivens possibilities for unlearning colonialism.

Conclusion

This article is unified by our shared concern that current educational practices continue to be dominated by colonial forms of relationship denial that have been naturalized and normalized as institutional common sense. Despite increasing levels of awareness of this problem, educational institutions continue to centre by default the cultural assumptions and onto-epistemological priorities that structure and control how human beings are formally educated to understand themselves and the world around them. This very complex problem is at the heart of the challenge to live in less ecologically damaging ways. The challenge to honour our kinship responsibilities and obligations to the life around us is not an informational or technological issue. Access to more information and faster technologies will not fix this problem for us. As we see it, the challenge to live in more sustainable ways is a cultural and spiritual problem. It is for these reasons that we seek to provide students with opportunities for prolonged and meaningful engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of knowing. When students are guided through educational engagements that are inspired by Indigenous pedagogical wisdom teachings, they undergo transformations in how they understand and experience knowledge and knowing, and this has a profound effect on how they understand themselves as human beings. It is with this process of unlearning colonialism that educational possibilities for a more sustainable future emerge.

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